

Bilirakis Op-Ed: Honor our true veterans today

Commentary: Honor Our True Veterans Today

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The meaning of the word "veteran" is often used for anyone who has been doing something for a long time.

Played professional baseball for 10 years? You're a veteran. Worked as a lawyer for 20 years? Another veteran. We often revere veteran sports stars, celebrities and political figures.

But these veterans would not be where they are if it weren't for the veterans we celebrate on this day – our military veterans.

The service of our nation's veterans spans every decade, every year and every day of our country's existence. Over time, our world has changed and our armed forces have changed with it, but the valor, dignity and courage of the men and women in uniform remain steadfast.

Veterans Day affords a time to embrace the heroes of all our wars and those who have worked to maintain peace. We remember those who gave all a person can give, and we remember the devotion they displayed as they became champions of a noble cause.

Our veterans did not disappoint their nation when it needed their service. They, in turn, should not be disappointed in their time of need. Our future as a free nation depends on whether we meet that obligation.

We must continue to provide improved access to the benefits and health care services that our nation's heroes have earned. Just this month, the Department of Veterans Affairs began distributing additional disability benefits to Vietnam veterans who have suffered from Agent Orange exposure. Nearly 200,000 veterans suffering from B-cell (or hairy-cell) leukemia, Parkinson's disease and ischemic heart disease are now presumed eligible for increased benefits for these conditions.

The VA must prepare for a new population of veterans in need of specialized forms of long-term care — populations that will need comfort and care for decades to come. I have made it a priority to work with Congress and the VA in bringing "Heroes' Ranch" to Tampa. This facility will serve our most severely wounded warriors. It will also allow their family members a more suitable residential location when long-term care is being provided to their loved ones in this age-appropriate setting and environment.

Once proven successful, this approach can be duplicated across the country.

Aside from protecting and improving their benefits, one of the best ways to remember the sacrifices of past service members is to support our current warriors and their families. In this time of war, we must remember and pray for those serving today, who already deserve a place alongside previous generations for their courage and the sacrifice.

Members of the armed forces are able to exhibit their level of strength and devotion due in large part to the network of support they have at home.

Recently, November was designated Military Family Month. During this time in particular, we celebrate the exceptional contributions of our military families. All sectors of our society are better off when we support these patriots. Businesses and companies can help by offering job opportunities and workplace flexibility. Local organizations and community groups can help when a loved one is deployed. Even the smallest actions by neighbors and friends send a profound message of gratitude to these families.

Today's military men and women are motivated by the same ideals that all veterans have shared. From those who fought in World War II, Korea, Vietnam and Desert Storm to those who continue to fight the faceless enemy in the war on terrorism, you still find the same passion to defend what this nation holds most dear: freedom.

While we give thanks to our veterans, remember what President John Fitzgerald Kennedy once said: "As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them."

For those who have served, may this day let you live with a renewed sense of pride in what you have given to America. May you continue to instill a deep sense of patriotism and love of our country in others, for this is essential to maintaining our freedom for generations to come. For those who are not veterans, please continue to support our past and present service members. Let us also remember our deployed troops as they go in harm's way on our behalf. It is up to you, me

and our children after us to give meaning to their sacrifice and to preserve the principles they have protected.

And never forget that while there may be many "veterans" in our world, the ones we should celebrate and cherish are those who have worn, are wearing, and will wear the military uniform of this great nation.

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